



Our mission is conserving Rocky Mountain and Great Plains birds through research, monitoring, education, and outreach

For the Birds: Parks in the Northern Great Plains

By Arvind Panjabi

There is a place where the unbroken prairie still rolls on forever, and where ribbons of lush riparian woodland, alive with the songs of migratory birds, wind through badlands and dissect the open plains. Here, an archipelago of pine-clad islands rises up from a sea of grass, and along high buttes, eagles and falcons soar over sprawling prairie dog towns and herds of antelope on the plains below.

If this sounds to you like a national park, you're both right and wrong. This primeval landscape is the mixed-grass prairie of the northern Great Plains, perhaps the most contiguous native grassland ecosystem remaining in the United States today. It stretches from roughly Cheyenne, Wyoming north to Williston, North Dakota, east to the Missouri River and west to the Rocky Mountains. The bulk of this landscape is privately owned, but within this lightly populated matrix of ranches and scattered small towns is a network of public lands that includes numerous National Forests and Grasslands, and over a dozen National Park Service lands.

Some of these parks, such as Devil's Tower or Mount Rushmore, are familiar to most Americans, while others, such as Knife

River Indian Villages, probably don't even ring a bell. But for those of us who sometimes eschew national parks because of their noisy hoards gawking at wildlife through the windows of their idling SUVs, these lightly visited and minimally developed parks in the Northern Great Plains Network (NGPN) may just be some of the best kept secrets of the National Park System. This is Lewis and Clark country, and many of the parks established in this region commemorate important places along their journey. Nonetheless, each park supports a treasure trove of biological diversity. And for today's modern adventurers, especially road-weary birders in

search of their lifer Baird's Sparrow or some other northern grassland specialty, the rivers, forests and woodlands of these parks offer a refreshing respite from the otherwise two-dimensional landscape.

Recently the National Park Service began a nationwide Inventory and Monitoring (I&M) program to rigorously document the flora and fauna of each park so that managers have the information they need to be effective stewards of the resources with which they are entrusted. The goal of the inventories is to survey all the biological resources in each park so that at least 90% of all species expected in each park will have been documented by the end of the inventory. After that time, monitoring programs will be established to ensure the maintenance of these resources into the future.

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View overlooking the North Woods and Missouri River at Knife River Villages National Historic Site, North Dakota.

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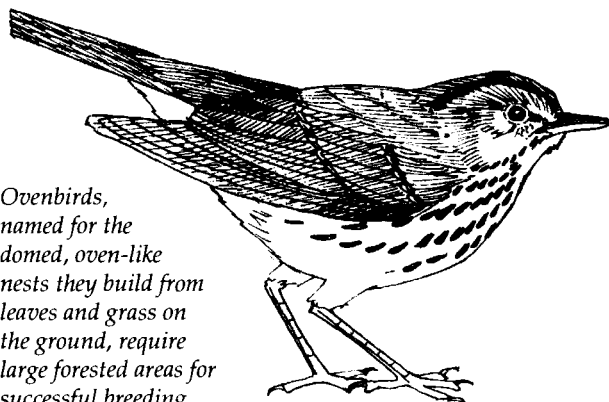
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When the NGPN began implementing I&M efforts in 2002, they looked to Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory for assistance. Since then, RMBO has conducted two years of rapid inventories and/or established permanent transects for long-term bird monitoring in seven parks in the region. The work is being conducted using protocols compatible with those used by RMBO elsewhere in the region, so that results from individual parks will be comparable to the larger landscape.

Through this cooperative effort, RMBO biologists have documented numerous new species in each park, and confirmed the presence of both expected and previously documented species. RMBO's surveys have also found numerous species of conservation interest, as well as unusually high densities of some species. For example, surveys in Wind Cave National Park in the Black Hills have revealed higher densities of Grasshopper Sparrows and Upland Sandpipers than anywhere else in the Black Hills. RMBO has also documented rare breeders such as Eastern Phoebe, and rare transient migrants such as Alder Flycatcher, in the park. In Jewel Cave National Monument in the Black Hills, RMBO biologists have found Black-backed Woodpeckers, a species of concern in this region that specializes in burned forests, in densities four times greater than those in surrounding areas. Other locally rare species found in Jewel Cave include Northern Goshawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, and Indigo Bunting. At Fort Laramie National Historic Site in southeast Wyoming, RMBO biologists have found an unusually high concentration of Red-headed Woodpeckers, a species that is on the Partners in Flight Watch List due to a more than 50% loss in its population over the last 30 years. Eastern Bluebirds, a rare species in Wyoming, have also been recorded at Fort

Laramie. In North Dakota's Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, RMBO biologists have documented a diverse suite of waterbirds along the Missouri River, including Soras, Wilson's Phalaropes, Caspian, Forster's and Least Terns, Marbled Godwits, and Blue-winged Teal, among others. Also at Fort Union is an interesting "East-meets-West" songbird community that includes Western Kingbirds, Black-and-white Warblers, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Ovenbirds, Veerys, Lazuli Buntings, and Baltimore Orioles, to name a few.

Perhaps one of the crown jewels of the NGPN is a small park commemorating the site of one of the oldest known Native American settlements. The Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, situated along the confluence of the Knife and Missouri rivers in North Dakota, was occupied over a span of 8,000 years, most recently by people of the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes. This 1,758-acre park contains some of the highest quality riparian woodland anywhere in the region, and so far, RMBO has documented 83 breeding species there. By far the most productive area for birds in this park is the "North Woods," which in 2002 supported densities of riparian birds averaging 44 per hectare (~2.5 acres), higher than anywhere else in this region. Common birds in these woods include American Redstarts, House Wrens, Yellow Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos, and Least Flycatchers, while less common species include Cooper's Hawks, Bald Eagles, Black-billed Cuckoos, Great Crested Flycatchers, and Black-and-white Warblers. In 2002, a pair of Broad-winged Hawks was also observed in the park. The grasslands here also support high densities of birds: in 2003, Grasshopper Sparrows occurred in average densities of one per hectare, and Bobolinks occurred in densities of two birds per hectare! Needless to say, this park supports a lot of birds.



Ovenbirds, named for the domed, oven-like nests they build from leaves and grass on the ground, require large forested areas for successful breeding.

So, if you're looking for an adventure this summer, take a trip to the northern Great Plains and visit some of the National Parks, Forests, and Grasslands in this region. It will be worth the trip. And hey, you might even get a lifer along the way.